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Synopses of Important Articles.

LUTHER'S STELLUNG ZUR HEILIGEN SCHRIFT, IHREN WERT UND IHRER AUTORITÄT, von PASTOR K. THIMME, in *Neue Kirchliche Zeitschrift*, No. 8, pp. 644-675.

It is the purpose of this discussion to exhibit and explain the twofold or double attitude of Luther toward the sacred Scriptures, according to which he, on the one hand, implicitly and totally submitted to their authority, and, on the other, showed such a remarkable degree of freedom in regard to the character of some of the Bible books. The sum and substance of this twofold attitude can be given in the two statements that for Luther the sacred Scriptures "are the Word of God," and that "they contain the Word of God in human form." In our days these statements have not infrequently become the shibboleths of two antagonistic theological parties. In Luther they are united in a higher unity without any difficulty, a proof of the thoroughly evangelical method of the reformer's thoughts, equally free from a fanaticism that claims to need no written word, and from a narrow-minded literalism. These twofold views in Luther have but one and the same root, the same out of which his whole faith and Christianity grew, namely, his personal experience of the free grace of God in Christ.

It is known that Luther ascribed this personal experience of the grace of God in Christ not to the current church teachings of his day nor to the church practices, but solely to his close study of the Scriptures. In his *Tischreden*, 57, 99, he says: "My trials and troubles drove me into the Scriptures, and them I have diligently studied until I learned to understand them." The Scriptures became for him the word of life. They are most intimately connected with the origin and development of his faith. Cf. *Opera*, I, 22. In all of his many statements concerning the Scriptures in which he emphasizes their authority and their comfort, it can be seen that this conviction has been attained not by an intellectual process, but is the outcome of his heart's experience with the Scriptures. In his heart of hearts he felt nothing to be firmer than that "the Scriptures are the Word of God," and he never felt the need of qualifying or restricting this statement. Looked at from whatever side, the sum of his faith and hope was this truth of Christian experience, that the Scriptures are the divine revelation as norm of Christian faith and practice. In Luther these two ideas of Scriptures and experience constantly go hand in hand, and hundreds of citations from his works could be given showing this and also demonstrating that these Scriptures are for him the absolutely firm and reliable foundation. Nothing can shake his confidence in the Word.

Yet side by side with such unbounded trust in the Scriptures we have from Luther very decided judgments of disapproval in regard to certain books or passages in the Bible. He makes a decided distinction between the Old and New Testaments. The former is indeed also the Word of God and is to be highly esteemed, yet not intrinsically to be compared with the latter. Many portions of the Old Testament he regarded as no longer binding on the Christians. In his *Introduction to the Old Testament* he divides its contents into three kinds. He declares it a *liber legis*; then draws attention to its "*exempla et historiae*," and thirdly to the Messianic promises. Chiefly the latter give the Old Testament whatever permanent value it has. Some of his statements on the Old Testament are very decided. In his work *Wider die himmlischen Propheten* he says: "Moses was given to the Jewish people and we Gentiles and Christians have nothing to do with him."

Most remarkable are his opinions on certain books of the Bible. He has a keen appreciation for the human factor in these writings. The prediction of the future, which fills so much space in the prophetic writings, Luther was accustomed to regard as of comparatively little value. He says: "These neither teach nor improve the Christian doctrine. Therefore this prophetic power is probably one of the least gifts of God, which sometimes also comes from the devil." He understood the literary processes that led to the composition of the prophets. He remarks: "The later prophets studied the books of the earlier prophets, and appropriated their good thoughts." Concerning Moses he says: "It is at least a possibility that he received the ten commandments from the fathers." He regards it as certain that most of the ordinances contained in the Pentateuch have been received from the fathers, considers it possible that Moses took some of them from neighboring nations. The chief reason why Luther held the Psalms in so high an estimation was because he regarded them as the expression of the deepest personal feelings of their human authors. In his *Introduction to the Writings of Solomon* he lays the chief stress on the pious human thought here exhibited by the believer in Jehovah. In his famous work *De Servo Arbitrio* he says that "it deserves more than all others of being excluded from the canon." In his *Table Talk* he declares: "I am so hostile to the second book of Maccabees and to Esther that I wish they did not exist, for they Judaize too much and are full of heathen rubbish (*Unart*)."¹ On the other hand, of the apocryphal book of Moses he says: "The contents of this book are almost as good as we find in the other sacred books of the Scriptures." In another place he says: "This book ought to have been received among the number of canonical writings." It is apparent that the distinction made by Luther as early as the Leipzig disputation between canonical and apocryphal had more a theoretical than a practical character.

Almost more pronounced are Luther's sharp judgments on certain books of the New Testament. Here, too, he felt himself bound rather by the spirit than by the letter. Not even the authority of the primitive church is for

Luther an absolutely decisive factor in the make-up of his views on the canonical position or worth of a book. He is moved chiefly by the contents of these books, especially by the fact whether or not they "urge Christ" (*Christum treiben*), a frequently recurring word and rule in Luther's writings. In the case of three of the *Antilegomena*, namely 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, he does not pay any attention to the fact that they lack the authoritative approval of the ancient church. Concerning Hebrews, James, Jude, and Revelation, he expressly states that the ancient church did not regard them as of equal value with the others. Luther's attitude toward these four was entirely determined by inner reasons. He finds "hard nuts" in Hebrews, because in his opinion chapters 6-10 directly deny repentance. His hard judgments on St. James are well known. In his Leipzig thesis he says: "The spirit (*stilus*) of this letter is by far beneath the apostolic majesty of St. Paul and is not at all to be compared with him." In his Introduction to the New Testament in 1822—but not reprinted in later edition—he says: "Compared with the other chief books, the epistle of St. James is a real straw epistle, for it has not in it the right evangelical ring (*Art.*)."¹ Again, he here says: "This epistle contradicts directly (*gibt stracks wider*) Paul's and all other writings in teaching a righteousness by works. It pretends for the rest to be teaching Christ, but does not even make mention of his suffering, death, and resurrection." Again: "For such reasons, one can feel that it is not a real apostolic letter," and again, "It has not been written by an apostle, nor has it the apostolic ring and spirit in accordance with the pure doctrine." In his *Opera Exegetica*, v, 227, he even says: "Male concludit, *delirat Jacobus*."² In his *Table Talk* he is willing to give anybody his doctor's hat who can reconcile James with Paul. These are all of the statements found in Luther concerning James. His condemnation of the Apocalypse is even more decided. For him it is a *liber obscurus et incertus*, and is to be regarded as neither apostolic nor prophetic. He regards it as of about the same value as the apocalyptic fourth book of Ezra. In later years Luther spoke more mildly on this book.

The same freedom characterizes the reformer's views on particular passages of the Scriptures. There are not wanting passages in Luther in which he admits the presence of errors in the Scriptures, especially between the synoptics and John, particularly in chronological and local topics.

The canon and rule adopted by Luther in judgments on the books of the Bible he himself formulates in connection with his criticism of St. James, when he says: "Whatever preaches Christ is apostolic, even if it were spoken or written by Judas, by Hannas, by Pilate, or by Herod. Whatever does not teach Christ is not apostolic, even if taught by Peter or Paul."

The exceptional merit of this article lies in the fact that it furnishes the data upon which judgment can be passed on the disputed question as to the position of Luther toward the Scriptures, as both advanced and conservative critics claim him as their own. That a good deal can be learned from Luther's *healthy* position also for our day will not escape a careful reader. The author's production deserves careful study. G. H. S.